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May 7, 2007

Church offers hope not money, bishop says

SÃO PAULO, Brazil (Zenit.org): The Church offers hope to the poor but -- unlike certain sects -- does not bribe people to convert to the faith by promising economic gains, says a Brazilian bishop.

Auxiliary Bishop Joaquim Mol Guimarães of Belo Horizonte, representing the Brazilian bishops' conference, made these comments Thursday to the press regarding a study on religious affiliation by the Getulio Vargas Foundation.

The study shows that although the percentage of Brazilians who are Catholic has remained stable, many of the country's poor have left the Church to join sects or neo-Pentecostal communities.

Bishop Mol Guimarães explained that this is due to the diffusion of a "theology of prosperity" among the poor by many neo-Pentecostal groups that link following Christ with social prosperity.

According to the foundation's research, the number of Catholics in Brazil grew at the same rate as the population between 2000 and 2003, representing 74% of the country's population.

The study also shows that more Brazilians claim a religious affiliation. In 2000, some 7.4% of those polled said they had no religious affiliation; in 2003 that number fell to 5.1%. This decrease occurred mainly among the poor.

Misery and vulnerability

Bishop Mol Guimarães said that the study points to a need to evangelize the outskirts of major cities, where the poor live in conditions of misery.

"This misery leaves the human person susceptible to solutions for their situation offered by various religions," he told ZENIT.

According to the bishop, people need to be raised from misery, or they will "base their choice of religion, or their decision to change religions, on this hope offered by the religious group."

Persons with a quality of life that reflects their dignity feel more free to choose a faith, a decision "which is a free act for each person," he added.

"They cannot be swayed by the promise of easy solutions," Bishop Mol Guimarães continued. "Better public policies for the poor give them the freedom to start living the life spelled out in the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

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"The Church's presence among the poor is a presence that increases the hope of these people, without disappointing them, so that they may get involved in the political process in order to improve their lives through the public forum and participate in programs offered by the Church."

Solidarity

Archbishop João Bráz de Aviz of Brasilia told ZENIT that the upcoming 5th General Conference of the Episcopate of Latin America and the Caribbean will focus on solidarity.

"What is necessary is a witness of brotherhood that speaks for itself," he said.

According to Archbishop Bráz de Aviz: "The major problem we have is linking faith in God to a change of mindset and our efforts toward others.

"It is vital that we, once again, unite these two aspects: the experience of God and brotherhood among people.

"Today we can give an authentic witness in which brotherhood is presented simply and truly. Everyone, including the poor, understands that."

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